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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 002444

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/19/2018  
TAGS: PGOV PREL SENV AMGT KS  
SUBJECT: ENVIRONMENT MINISTER ON CLIMATE CHANGE, USFK CAMP  
RETURNS, AND VEHICLE EMISSIONS REGULATIONS

Classified By: Ambassador Kathleen Stephens. Reasons 1.4(b/d)

¶1. (C) Summary: In a December 16 luncheon meeting with ROK Environment Minister Lee Maan-ee, Ambassador and Minister Lee discussed climate change, Korea's Ultra-Low Emission Vehicle (KULEV) regulations due to go into effect January 1, environment issues related to USFK camp returns, and domestic politics. Minister Lee, who had just returned from Poznan, Poland, said that he saw little or no progress at United Nations climate change talks that had concluded there; all delegations were looking to the new U.S. administration for leadership in forging a new post-Kyoto agreement. On KULEV, Ambassador pressed for flexibility on our request for an extension of the existing exemption for U.S. vehicles. She noted that U.S. carmakers say the Fleet Averaging System, under which offsets for Super Ultra Low Emission Vehicles could (subsequently) be applied to vehicles that do not meet the new regulations, would not work for them. The Minister made no promises, but said he understood the U.S. position and would discuss the issue with his staff. On USFK base returns, the Minister said that he was pleased by recent progress in the Joint Environmental Assessment Process (JEAP). He would like to be helpful on camp returns, but USFK must also understand that Koreans had become more sensitive to environmental concerns. Lee said MOE would try to work cooperatively with USFK on the Hialeah return, but urged that both sides refrain from blaming each other for past difficulties. Ambassador welcomed this approach, noting that camp returns should be a positive story for the alliance. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Environment Minister Lee Maan-ee is a retired civil servant with long stints at the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of Environment. Previous to his current appointment, Lee headed Lee Myung-bak's presidential campaign in Gwangju, the progressive bastion of South Korea, where LMB eventually only won 10 percent of the votes. Still, that was more than LMB expected, a result pundits attributed to Lee Maan-ee, a popular and respected figure in his home town of Gwangju. In lieu of an introductory courtesy call, Minister Lee invited Ambassador to a lunch on December 16; they discussed a range of environmental issues and domestic politics.

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Climate Change: Looking for US Leadership  
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¶3. (SBU) Minister Lee, who had just returned from Poznan, Poland, where he had participated in the final four days of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change conference, said he saw little real progress. The issues were so complex with too many participating countries; he was not surprised

that movement was only incremental. Lee found the bilateral meetings more useful, including those he had with U/S Dobrianski and Senator Kerry. He said he detected general anticipation of change in policy direction by the new incoming U.S. administration; delegations were waiting for U.S. leadership to forge a new agreement to replace the Kyoto Protocol.

¶4. (SBU) On substance, Lee said that the U.S. and Korea shared the same general approach to global climate change. Lee was pleased that Korea had hosted the fourth Major Economies Meeting in June and hoped the MEM process, an initiative by President Bush, would continue into the next administration. This was a very useful venue for bringing together 16 countries that, between them, produced approximately 80 percent of the world's greenhouse gas emissions, Lee said. The Ambassador said she was eager to broaden cooperative activities the U.S. and Korea have been taking together to address global climate change, such as the good partnership we both enjoyed in the Asia-Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and in other multilateral fora and bilateral initiatives.

¶5. (SBU) Domestically, Minister Lee said, most of his time was expended on Korea's new "Low Carbon, Green Growth Plan." (Note: This is another name for Korea's Basic Plan for National Energy, draft legislation due to come before the National Assembly in early 2009 that calls for reduction in Korea's greenhouse gas emissions primarily through investment in new and renewable energy technologies. Although the bill does not set out specific emissions targets, it introduces a carbon emission trading system, specifies procedures for greenhouse gas monitoring, and spells out reporting obligations of greenhouse gas emitting industries to the government. End note.) He said that because local input is essential to national programs, he sends his staff to the provinces and to municipalities not only to explain national policies, but also to learn about the local problems they are facing and the local solutions they are putting in place. Since "low carbon, green growth" was an issue that also cuts across several ministries, the MoE consults closely with other domestic agencies to ensure integrated implementation, Lee said.

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KULEV  
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¶6. (C) Ambassador said that there were a very small number of U.S. automobiles, less than 800 per year, that did not meet the Korea Ultra-Low Emission Vehicle (KULEV) Regulations, which were due to go into effect at the end of this month. Ambassador appreciated the exemption that had been applied until now, but because the new regulation was due to go into effect at a sensitive time - during the transition to the new U.S. administration, while FTA ratification was still pending, and at a time when U.S. automakers were struggling - we needed to find a solution, and had asked to extend the exemption for these very small number of vehicles.

¶7. (C) Minister Lee expressed general sympathy for the U.S. position. Director General for International Cooperation Kim Chan-woo, who accompanied Minister Lee, said he understood that cars that did not meet the new KULEV regulations could still be imported into Korea by using the Fleet Averaging System and the offset for Super Ultra Low Emission Vehicles. Ambassador said she knew about the Fleet Averaging System, but explained that our carmakers did not believe the system would work for their exports. She urged Minister Lee and DG Kim to seek a better solution, noting that she believed an exemption to the new regulations could be the best way forward. The Minister and Director General promised to discuss the issue with MOE staff in the relevant Division.

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USFK Camp Returns  
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¶8. (C) Ambassador recalled that she had visited Camp Hialeah in Busan two years ago, soon after USFK had closed the facility. It was unfortunate that the camp had yet to be returned to the ROK. Return of this valuable land and facilities should be good news for everyone. During her recent visit to Busan, Mayor Hur expressed frustration over the continued delays in returning Hialeah, which he said would become a "people's park." Ambassador urged cooperation with USFK to accomplish a timely return of these facilities to Korea.

¶9. (C) Minister Lee said that he was aware of the difficulties. However, we were making some progress. Two weeks ago, our two governments had agreed on the Joint Environmental Assessment Procedure, which would govern all aspects of environmental remediation for returning camps and facilities. Environmental protection and remediation were very difficult issues in any circumstance. South Korea was a very different country than it was several decades ago when economy and security trumped all other concerns. Now, Koreans were very sensitive to quality of life issues, especially environment protection.

¶10. (C) Lee continued that he was aware that Americans felt frustrated that US military facilities, which had been used to defend South Korea, were posing such serious concerns. Lee said this should not be viewed as an issue of being anti-or-pro-America. Rather, the issue was about ensuring the right amount of cleaning up. He said that when he was Chairman of the Environmental Management Corporation, people in Gwangju complained about USFK pollution, but he found out and publicized that the pollution they were complaining about had actually been caused by provincial road construction.

¶11. (C) Both sides should of course take into account the invaluable help of the U.S. in defending Korea's freedom and democracy, Lee continued, but Koreans would respond much more favorably to the concept of partnership, rather than being made to feel obligated to show gratitude. After all, he said, both U.S. and Korean forces fought together to defend freedom and democracy. The Minister said he welcomed more contact with USFK because he was ready to make it easier to close these facilities so that they could become parks and schools. Ambassador said she would be happy to help facilitate such cooperation; Minister Lee welcomed the suggestion.

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Honam: Then and Now  
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¶12. (C) Recalling that he started his working life as an English teacher some 40 years ago, Lee said his home region -- the two southwest Cholla Provinces, or "Honam" -- had approximately the same population as the two southeast Gyeongsang Provinces, or "Youngnam." Now, Honam had only a third of the population of Youngnam, because many people had chosen to move out of the economically backward region, mostly headed for Seoul. Lee said authoritarian leader Park Chung-hee had instigated ill will between the two regions to consolidate and stay in power, and this is the reason for the continuing tension and rivalry between the two regions. Lee also granted that anti-American sentiments were stronger in Honam than elsewhere because the United States was seen as propping the Park and then the Chun governments at that time.

¶13. (C) Many in Honam believed that the USG closed the American Cultural Center in Gwangju because of anti-American sentiments associated with the May 1980 Gwangju uprising, Lee said. This was a shame because he himself had benefited enormously from the Center, and it could have helped America's image in Honam. Ambassador said that the Center had been closed for budgetary reasons, not because of anti-Americanism. She expressed her personal regret that so many U.S. constituent posts like that in Gwangju had been closed because of budget.

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Comment

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¶14. (C) Lee Maan-ee is the leading Honam figure in the LMB administration, which serves him well, because LMB must show that he is inclusive of all regions. Lee's toughest task is managing the environmental NGOs, which are mostly progressive and very critical of the LMB administration -- and were successful in May in getting him to postpone construction of the Grand Canal, a proposed 540 km canal project connecting Seoul and Busan. So far, Lee has stayed above the fray, and has not involved himself with the recent and on-going investigations into several NGO leaders who, according to ROK prosecutors, have been involved in various financial improprieties.

STEPHENS